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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 RANGOON 000287

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES IN MANDALAY

REF: A. RANGOON 246

B. 05 RANGOON 321

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Embassy held a highly successful "Outreach Week in Mandalay" February 26-March 2. The Charge led over a dozen Embassy staff to Burma's second largest city and conducted a broad range of meetings and outreach activities with NGOs, business leaders, political parties, religious groups, activists, students, diplomats, and local officials. Despite heavy-handed scrutiny and monitoring by local officials, large numbers of local citizens attended Embassy-hosted events, including a reception, a presentation on study opportunities in the U.S., and a discussion on regional trade issues.

¶2. (C) Local authorities, however, showed less enthusiasm about our presence and outreach efforts, disrupting two Embassy events and attempting to intimidate would-be participants and interlocutors. Several local regime officials did not respond to requests for meetings with the Charge, and the Mandalay Mayor had little to say, other than "seek approval for anything you do." Nonetheless, we discovered a great thirst among the local population for all that the United States has to offer. Many locals willingly risked the wrath of the regime to partake in our events; others work around the authorities to implement their own modest efforts aimed at improving livelihoods. We see Mandalay as a city of great opportunity and we will continue our outreach efforts there. End Summary.

GIVE US MORE

¶3. (SBU) During the week of February 26-March 2, the Charge led an interagency mission team to Mandalay, the country's second largest city and gateway to many ethnic nationality areas and the Chinese and Indian borders. Eighteen Embassy officers and local employees participated in the successful outreach effort, conducting a broad range of meetings and outreach activities with NGOs, business leaders, political parties, religious groups, activists, students, diplomats, and local officials. Septel messages address the specific views of Indian and Chinese diplomats in Mandalay, the local economy, and human rights and religious freedom issues.

¶4. (SBU) During the course of the week in Mandalay, Embassy officers encountered extremely high enthusiasm among the local population for U.S. outreach activities. Over 60 local guests attended a reception hosted by the Charge, approximately 130 students attended a joint public diplomacy/consular session on education opportunities in the United States, and dozens of business entrepreneurs participated in an economic presentation on regional trade issues.

¶5. (SBU) Without prompting, many of the participants at our outreach events requested more U.S. sponsored activities in Mandalay. Many noted that they have no ability to travel and asked for the Embassy to duplicate events and activities in Mandalay similar to those held at the American Center in Rangoon, including speaker programs, English-language training, and a resource library. "Please come back to Mandalay," pleaded numerous contacts who lamented the closing of the U.S. Consulate over 25 years ago.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

¶6. (C) We heard from a variety of sources that Major General Khin Zaw, commander of the central military command and the regime's senior local official, has created a highly restrictive environment in Mandalay and imposed government oversight on most facets of local life. Nonetheless, we also heard from NGOs and businesses that they have used creative and innovative methods to reach local populations.

¶7. (U) During a visit to the Phaung Daw Oo monastery, the Charge and Embassy personnel met with senior monks who founded an integrated education high school 13 years ago. In collaboration with several international NGOs, such as World Vision, and the support of many aid agencies and donor

countries, including the Embassy's American Center, the monastery provides free education for nearly 7,000 students from Mandalay's poorest families. Although the impressive operation encountered new difficulties with the GOB following the ouster of former PM Khin Nyunt, the school's senior monks collaborate openly with the international community, including tourists who volunteer for short stints as vocational instructors.

¶ 18. (C) The Charge also met with Ludu Daw Amar, one of Burma's most well-respected and influential authors. The 90-year old activist recently used savings from her family publishing business to construct a three-story library. The modest facility, which we visited, is open to the public and, when completed, will be one of the largest libraries in Mandalay. Access, however, is only by appointment, Ludu Daw Amar said, "Because I don't want the authorities to come and take all my books." She noted that she frequently receives visitors at her home, but said that local officials "don't like it" and question her after visits. "I'm not afraid of them, though," she added, "because I am still able to think freely."

¶ 19. (C) Ludu Daw Amar grew bitter when talking about the current situation in Burma, observing that much has deteriorated since the colonial period. "Even the British gave us 60 percent democracy," she said, "and now we have nothing." She also signaled her strong support for international pressure against the regime. She agreed with the Charge that the regime has no public support, but said she was pessimistic about immediate change because "the government has the guns." She concluded that the Burmese people are "waiting for a spark, and then they will rise up; the status quo in Burma can't last forever."

#### THE OPPOSITION: TALES OF WOE, TALES OF COURAGE

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¶ 10. (C) The Charge and P/E Chief met on February 27 with five senior leaders of the National League for Democracy's (NLD) Mandalay division executive committee. When the Charge inquired how the United States could help the democratic opposition in Mandalay, the party leaders appealed for English language instruction and for a local English language library. They encouraged the Charge to inform local authorities when pursuing such activities, but advised against requesting permission. "If you ask, they will refuse," said Vice Chairman U Thein Htike, who also suggested that the Embassy start out slowly with small-scale activities to avoid unwanted attention from the GOB.

¶ 11. (C) The party leaders, several of whom are former political prisoners, described a litany of growing abuses the regime has inflicted on party members. They said that authorities routinely film their meetings and that GOB provocateurs had recently made several attempts to run party leaders over with motorcycles. The regime, they said, no longer arrested NLD members on political charges, but rather on trumped up criminal charges--leading to harsher sentences of hard labor and confinement with violent criminals.

¶ 12. (C) The NLD leaders said that they believed the GOB and its mass-member organization, the USDA, were preparing a wide-scale attack on NLD party members and their family members in the Mandalay region. Daw Win Mya Mya, who was seriously injured in the 2003 Depeyin attack, said that NLD members had observed "tell-tale signs" of pre-attack preparations, such as the GOB equipping ward-level USDA members with bamboo staves and releasing common criminals from jails to join local USDA and militia units. "This is exactly what we witnessed in the lead up to the Depeyin attack," she said.

¶ 13. (C) Despite regime abuses, said the NLD leaders, they manage to conduct some party activities. Following the recent release in Rangoon of an NLD proposal for dialogue (ref A), the divisional leaders convoked the party's 30 township party leaders for a meeting on February 24 in Mandalay. Twenty-four of the local leaders attended the meeting, without GOB interference, where they endorsed what division chairman U Bo Zan called "the best NLD proposal ever." He added that the NLD informs authorities in advance and they are permitted to hold events in their private homes for up to 50 participants, including weekly leadership meetings.

#### "SEEK APPROVAL"

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¶ 14. (SBU) In contrast to the warm reception offered by Mandalay citizens, local authorities showed less enthusiasm for our presence and outreach efforts. Local intelligence agents monitored all of our activities, photographed participants at our outreach events, and questioned our interlocutors before and after meetings. The Charge requested an opportunity to brief senior officials in Mandalay on our outreach activities, but the regime's

regional military commander (Central Command) and the Mandalay police chief did not respond. On February 27, however, the Charge, joined by the DATT, called on Mandalay Mayor and Chairman of the Mandalay City Development Committee (MCDC), Brigadier General Phone Zaw Han.

¶15. (SBU) The Charge thanked the Mayor for the meeting and informed him, "as a neighbor," of our intent to make greater use of the former U.S. Consulate property (Note: MCDC's "City Hall" is located across the street from our property. End Note). The Charge solicited the Mayor's ideas on how the facility might be used effectively to meet the needs of the Mandalay citizenry, noting that possible activities might include English courses and other educational and cultural events.

¶16. (SBU) The Mayor demurred and responded that we should inform the Ministry of Home Affairs of any planned programs. Home Affairs would in turn inform the regional military commander and, "if he approved," then the program could proceed. BG Phone Za Han noted in passing that India, Pakistan, and New Zealand already offered English language programs in Mandalay. The Charge again stated that she sought the Mayor's ideas on use of the facility. She suggested that we could offer business management courses or even programs on Avian Influenza.

¶17. (SBU) The Mayor acknowledged that these were important and relevant topics, particularly for government staff, but restated that we would need to seek approval for any program. He also recommended that "summer" months (April-June) would be the best for courses, when employees work shorter hours and students are out of school. Once approved, he said, an appropriate location could be arranged. The Charge responded that our programs would make use of our existing former Consulate facility. The Charge also described our planned activities for the week, including meeting with local business leaders, discussing U.S. educational opportunities with students, and showing an award-winning U.S. movie. She reminded the Mayor that he and his staff were invited to our reception and restated our intention to be a "good neighbor."

¶18. (SBU) In response to the Charge's inquiry, BG Phone Za Han stated that his chief objectives in Mandalay were tree planting projects and upgrading water and transportation services. He indicated little familiarity with a Chinese-financed hydroelectric project. With regard to the local economy, he noted that Mandalay was not a particularly good agricultural region, but that MCDC was working on creating an industrial zone for agricultural products and on upgrades for steel, soap, and commodities processing facilities.

#### THE REGIME WELCOME WAGON

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¶19. (U) The Charge hosted a reception, without incident, at our hotel on February 27. We also hosted our economic discussion on regional trade at our former consulate property on February 28, again without incident. GOB photographers recorded the arrival and departure of attendees at both events.

¶20. (U) On February 28 and March 1 an anonymous tract circulated in Mandalay, warning "the people of flourishing Buddhism" to be "cautious of the Western Embassy Charge d'Affaires and team who are meddling and pursuing their old habits." The tract, written in the style of similar regime propaganda in the official press and in past pamphlets, claimed that Burmese Embassy diplomats are restricted to within 20 miles of their Embassy and yet "the Western Charge and her team want to go freely wherever they want." The tract criticized sanctions and also listed several Embassy meetings in Mandalay, citing the specific time and location of our lunch with local NLD leaders.

¶21. (SBU) On February 28, officials from the Township Peace and Development Council (Township PDC, the local branch of the regime), notified the manager of the five-star Sedona Hotel that he could not host our "Study in the U.S." presentation for Burmese students scheduled for later that evening, terming it "political." In a tersely written letter, the Council chairman stated that the hotel required permission from the Ministry of Education and from the Divisional PDC. The official also informed the hotel that it required Foreign Picture/Video Censor Board and Divisional PDC authorization for a film presentation. We had also scheduled the latter event at the hotel, including a follow-on discussion on ethnic and race issues, for about 50 invited participants.

¶22. (SBU) Given the hotel's inability to host the film/discussion, we notified invitees that we had postponed the event and plan to reschedule it at a later date. On the evening of February 28, however, over 130 students showed up at the hotel for the education presentation. Unable to

access the ballroom we had reserved, Embassy officers addressed the large group of enthusiastic students on a patio in front of the hotel and distributed materials with information on testing, university programs, and visa application procedures. Many students, undeterred by a phalanx of nearby government informers and photographers, lingered for several hours, posing individual questions to Embassy staff.

¶23. (C) A shaken expatriate hotel manager later apologized and told us that he was deeply embarrassed. "In a normal country," he said, "I could be sued for breaking contracts with a client to host such routine events." He expressed puzzlement over the GOB reaction, given that he had followed regular procedures and notified the Myanmar Travel and Tourism office several weeks earlier that the hotel planned to host U.S. Embassy-sponsored events. "Now it looks like I must also get permission directly from the military," he added.

¶24. (C) The Mandalay hotel manager also acknowledged that the British Council had recently canceled plans to host an education fair at the hotel, scheduled for the end of March. The Council regularly hosts a three-day education fair in Rangoon and draws over 500 attendees. A local employee of the Council's branch in Mandalay told us that the hotel had encountered delays in securing required authorization from local officials to host the fair. Facing these uncertainties, the Council had decided to pull the plug on the fair over a month in advance. We also visited the British Council's branch in Mandalay, which consists of a small library, reading room, and language lab. The local manager told us that the British Council never sought official authorization to open in Mandalay and the operation has been running "quietly" for over five years.

COMMENT: RISK THE WRATH

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¶25. (C) Mandalay strikes us as a city of great opportunity, as well as a maze of obstacles, for U.S. outreach activities in Burma. Mandalay, with over one million inhabitants and a base to reach millions of ethnic minorities, enables us to significantly expand our program ideas and information beyond Rangoon. Our outreach week showed a high level of interest among the general public. Many of them willingly risk the wrath of the regime to partake in our events and to work around the regime to prepare for a post-reform Burma.

¶26. (C) The suspicious attitudes of local authorities will require us to move forward in a quiet, step-by-step fashion--gradually ratcheting up our activities. Despite our willingness to meet with the local authorities, they appeared frightened to do so lest someone question them why, as they did to those willing to brave their intimidation tactics. Our week in Mandalay also revealed how tight the authorities try to control activities, not by confronting the threat (us) directly, but by pressuring others (not too successfully) to have nothing to do with us. End Comment.

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